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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of the open classroom approach is discussed. It is considered to be characterized by: (1) a child-centered, self-learning environment; (2) the teacher in the role of catalyst and guide; (3) a long-term commitment to exploration of new concepts and practices; (4) the needs and growth of children as the chief concern; (5) the progression of each child at his/her own rate; (6) reinforcement of open, original modes of behavior; and (7) an emotional/intellectual atmosphere encouraging exploration, experimentation and innovation. Since changes have been slow to provide open classrooms for the kindergarten-primary group, suggestions are made for converting the traditional classroom to a group of learning centers by rearrangement of furniture and supplies. Diagrams of suggested room arrangements are provided. The following suggested learning centers are described, with lists of equipment and activities for each: the domestic center, technological center, aesthetic center, environmental (science) center, mathematics center, communications (language arts) center, library corner, social learning center, perceptual-motor development center, audiovisual center. Organizational options for dividing the classroom among centers and the teacher are described. Methods of initiating the children into the open classroom approach and similar practical problems are also discussed. (KM)

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The Open Classroom Approach in the Kindergarten

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THE OPEN CLASSROOM APPROACH IN THE KINDERGARTEN

One of the current trends of education is the open classroom approach to learning. Exactly what this concept means is not yet apparent. Even the literature provides a variety of definitions and practices. To some people the concept means merely removing classroom walls and operating as always in this new, wide-open area. To others it suggests the elimination of desks, tables and large pieces of furniture so that children and teachers are free to communicate actively or passively on the floor. To still another group open space learning signifies an amalgamation of nongrading, continuums of learning, cross-grouping, with teachers working as teams, supporting adults, instigators and guides but rarely as "teachers".

There are other interpretations varied and exciting yet no consensus has been achieved. Looking carefully, however, at all open classroom strategies one perceives a general pattern of theory (if not practice) characterized by these factors:

1. The environment is child-centered placing major emphasis on self-learning rather than teacher-imposed learning.

2. The teacher's role is crucial yet conceived differently from custom; he is now a catalyst and guide, not a didactic force.

3. A sustained effort and long term commitment to this exploration of new concepts and practices is vital if the open classroom is to succeed; short-term implementation is merely frustrating.

4. The needs and growth of children is the chief concern breaking the cycle of curriculum first and children second.

5. Traditional pressures upon the child are removed permitting him to progress at his personal rate.

6. The environment reinforces open, original modes of behavior for the learner.

7. The emotional/intellectual atmosphere encourages exploration, experimentation and innovation.

It is obvious that these factors alter the pattern of traditional practice and minimize the venerable position of teacher dominated instruction. They stimulate also the very real concern of "HOW IS SUCH AN ENVIRONMENT ACHIEVED?"

As a beginning, it is important to understand what the open environment <u>IS NOT</u>:

1. It is NOT a permissive environment in which the child wanders aimlessly while the teacher pretends his meanderings are not annoying. Careful limits and codes of acceptable conduct are always necessary.

2. It is NOT a place where the teacher has no right to express personal feelings and reactions. This is a humanistic environment in which both child and adult have equal communication rights.

3. It is NOT a "do-anything-you-want" situation. On the contrary, it is genuinely concerned that the communal as well as the individual population receive equal rights and reaction time.

4. It is NOT a place where truly disturbing factors are tolerated in the name of innovative behaviors. Constant evaluation of activities must lead to continuous productive activities.

5. It is NOT an atmosphere of freedom without demand. Skillful and persistent encouragement are the order of the day with diligent emphasis upon, "Of course, it's hard but you can do it".

6. It is NOT a place of free choice only. Some daily planning in terms of child-needs is absolutely essential.

7. It is NOT a situation that depends wholly upon self-motivation. The learning centers are so filled with planned opportunities that they invite involvement and interaction.

Translating these tenets into a positive form we find that:

1. The open classroom is an environment which provides workable, productive alternatives to current school patterns that appear to be other than child-centered.

2. The philosophy of the open classroom is based on the principles of learning and child development:

    - A child learns best when self motivated.
    - A child learns best when satisfying his own needs and interests.
    - A child learns best in an atmosphere of acceptance.
    - A child learns best when experiencing success.
    - A child learns best when enjoying a good self-image.
    - A child succeeds when expected to succeed.

3. The open classroom provides:

    - Time to inquire.
    - Freedom to pursue individual ideas.
    - Encouragement to solve self-initiated questions and problems.
    - Space to explore, investigate and experiment.
    - Incidental and planned activities that help a child think well of himself, that satisfy a self-fulfilling expectancy the teacher has for him that develop within the child a sense of dignity security, respect and achievement.

4. The open classroom is a two-way process of action and interaction between child and teacher.

In short, the effective open classroom is a way of working with children that requires:

- A setting.
- A support system.
- A structure of human relationship.

It seems advisable to emphasize that anyone planning to embrace the open classroom concept must personally accept its basic philosophy and, more importantly, must be able to develop administrators, teachers and parents who are knowledgeable of and receptive to the total approach. When philosophy is initiated and accepted, the actual logistics are less difficult.

Throughout the nation the open classroom is manifested most often in new, privately owned child-care centers. In this kind of operation children are grouped in several ways:

1. 3's, 4's and 5's are together with the following teacher-pupil ratio:

   - One teacher to 10 three-year-olds.
   - One teacher to 15 four-year-olds.
   - One teacher to 20 five-year-olds.
   - Aides for each age grouping.

2. 4's, 5's and 6's are together with the following teacher-pupil ratio:

   - One teacher to 15 four-year-olds.
   - One teacher to 20 five-year-olds.
   - One teacher to 24 six-year-olds.
   - Aides for each age grouping.

3. 5's, 6's and 7's are together with the following teacher-pupil ratio:

   - One teacher to 20 five-year-olds.
   - One teacher to 24 six-year-olds.
   - One teacher to 24 seven-year-olds.
   - Aides for each age grouping.

Slowly but increasingly public schools are organizing the open approach. It is especially feasible with group arrangement three which makes possible a nongraded and/or continuous approach to learning. It provides, also, ample opportunity for satisfying the developmental needs and abilities of all kindergarten-primary children. Suggestions have been made to school administrators and architects that consideration be given to the open school concept that includes kindergarten in the planning. Many schools still isolate the youngest children in favor of open space classrooms for the primary-intermediate groups only. Since there are as many fives capable of operating on a six year level as there are sixes who should be working on a five year old level, the combined grouping would provide for any necessary intergrouping in addition to the normal individualization process. Perhaps, in the building of new schools, this fact might be considered seriously.

Until the time, however, that open classrooms are provided for the entire kindergarten-primary group, another course of actior is possible, one that is relatively easy to achieve.

The traditional classroom can be converted to a learning center approach by the simple rearrangement of furniture and supplies. In fact, the entire room need not be altered at onee; one or two centers can be instituted initially.

It does seem wise to block plan the entire room into those areas that eventually will be arranged since this will permit coordination and sequencing of centers.

When planning the development of centers, attention should be given to mapping multiple learning routes that allow for: (1) action-oriented children, (2) instructional strategies that are involved rather than "listen and learn" and "seatwork" styles, and (3) an arrangement of furniture and space so that "open highways" to and from the tools of learning are created. (See diagrams for suggested room arrangements.) There is no prescribed order for the organizing of learning centers but the following choices seem preferable.

Diagram I

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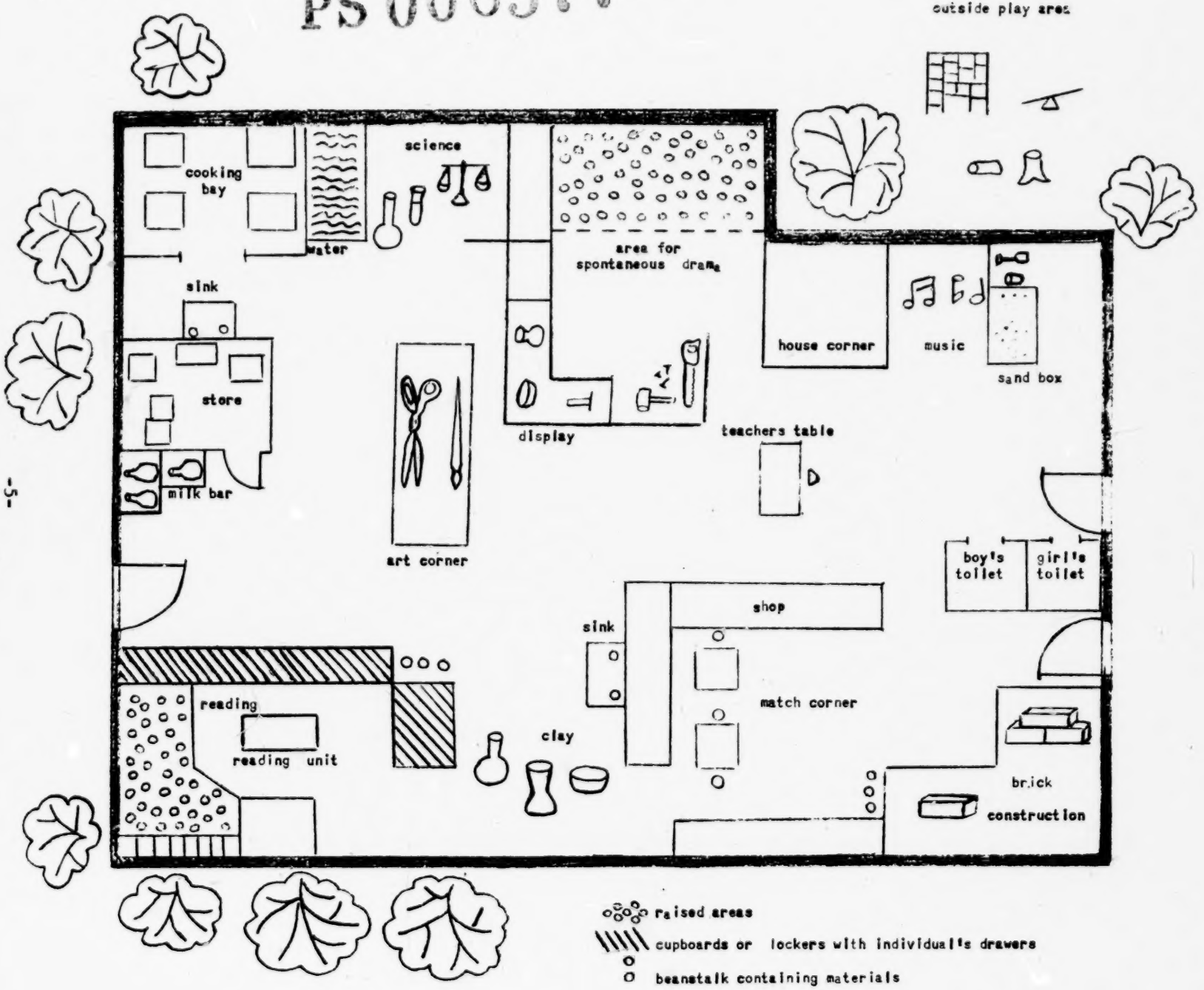
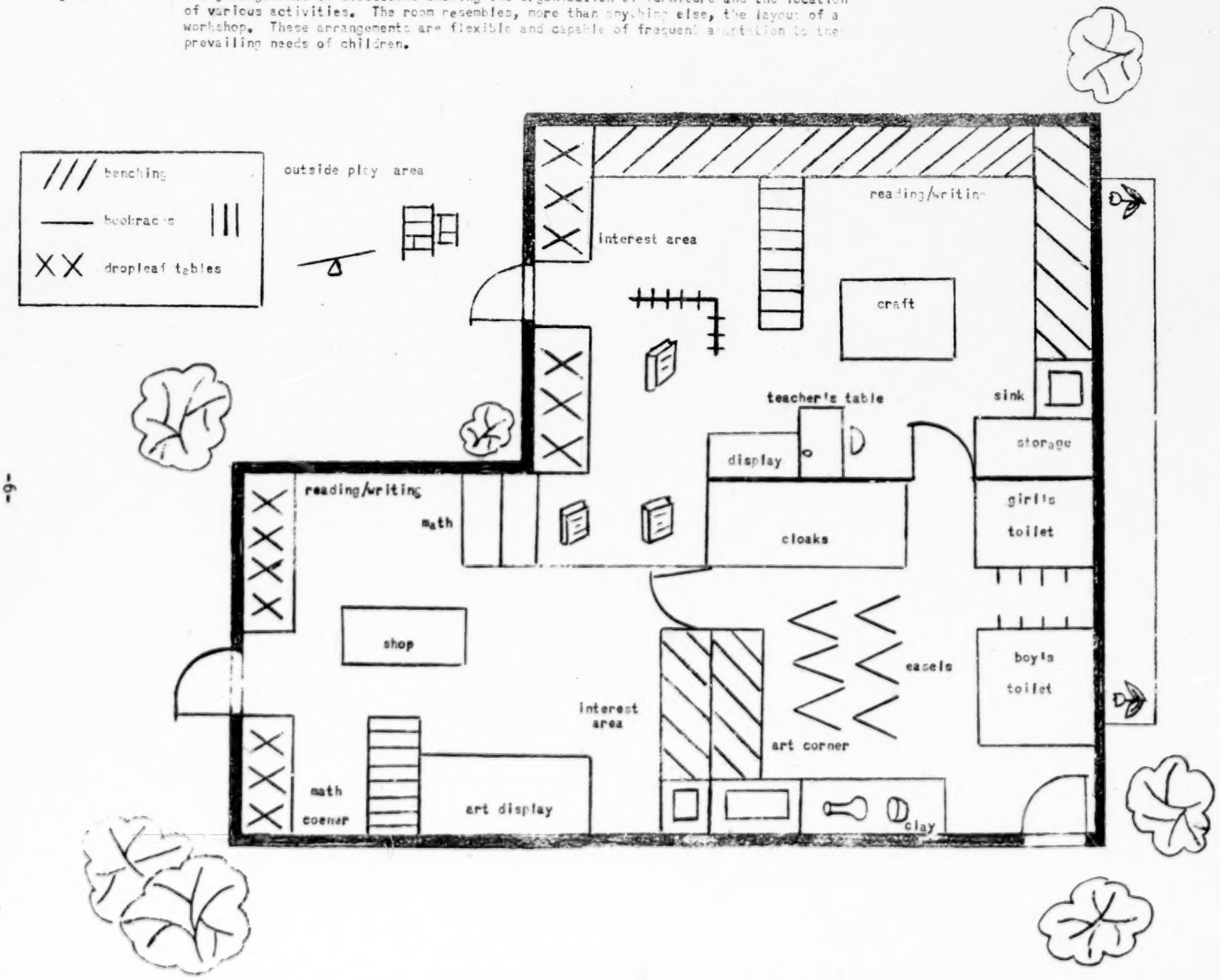


Diagram 2

Two arrangements of classrooms showing the organization of furniture and the location of various activities. The room resembles, more than anything else, the layout of a workshop. These arrangements are flexible and capable of frequent adaptation to the prevailing needs of children.



I. THE DOMESTIC CENTER

Equipment:

1. Kitchen, real if possible. Minimally, provide a hot plate, refrigerator and portable oven.
2. Snack supplies
3. Role-playing materials
4. Maintenance equipment

The domestic area should have a cozy effect and be placed in the sunniest area of the room hopefully to illustrate the warmth of home. In this center the children use equipment for actual household operations.

1. They plan and prepare daily snacks. Such snacks may be imaginative and include carrots, raisins, apples, peanut butter crackers, apple butter bread, puddings, jellos, iced cookies, gingerbread, home-made icecream, bread, butter, cakes, tarts, salads and any other food easily prepared by children.

2. They role-play a great deal.
   Because family and home are the highlights of their world, children spend much time imitating the things they see there. They try on the lives of the people they know, their work, their feelings, their words. Through this "acting out" children are able to bring some sort of reason out of the things they are learning and feeling about themselves and their world. Role-playing also helps them to develop a better understanding of others.

3. Children mirror in the domestic center what goes on at home, often depicting the emotional tension of the home.

   The father who bullies or bellows, for example, will often find his way into the activity of this area. It is frequently necessary for the teacher to tuck away in the silent corners of her mind what she hears in the domestic center.

4. Through this home-making corner, children provide the teacher with a view of their self-concept.

   Dependency and independency, abilities and inabilities, personal attitudes toward responsibility and reliability manifest themselves in daily activities of the domestic center. The children who say, "I can't" here will probably bring the same attitude to other activities of school.

II. THE TECHNOLOGICAL CENTER

Equipment:

1. Work table
2. Real tools
3. Building materials
   a. soft woods for easy nailing
   b. cardboard
   c. plywood
   d. metals
   e. wire
   f. glue
4. Nails, screws, tacks
5. Old tree stumps

The technological center should be placed near the domestic corner or, at least, away from the quieter areas of learning. Here children may use their creative abilities to put ideas into form:

1. They demonstrate their capacity for solving three-dimensional problems.

2. They experiment with a variety of materials.

3. They generate plans and ideas.

4. They demonstrate persistence in sticking to a task.

5. They develop coordination in use of tools as they pound, cut, measure, glue, twist, smooth, fasten, pry, form.

6. They show individual ability to organize materials for work.

7. They use materials not only for construction but as an open sesame for emotions.

   Angry children pound strategically-placed tree stumps, an outlet more acceptable than biting neighbors or kicking blocks.

   Non-verbal children often find a way to express themselves for creative efforts, even if offered silently to the teacher, fill children with a sense of achievement.

8. Children in this center demonstrate understanding of safety rules and learn what to do in an emergency.

III. THE AESTHETIC CENTER

Music Equipment:

1. Piano
2. Rhythm instruments (at least sticks for each child)
3. Real instruments (Tom-tom, two octave xylophone, tone bars, resonator bells)
4. Audio-aids (record player, listening posts, musical filmstrips and records)
5. Materials to make original instruments

Art Equipment:

1. Work table
2. Shelves for supplies
3. Display board
4. Supplies
5. Easels (floor, wall, tabletop)
6. Drying racks

To facilitate effective use of the aesthetic center, it should be divided into two areas, one for music and one for art.

In the music nook children learn many things:

1. They interpret rhythm, mood, music through bodily movement.

2. They hear and react to different sounds.

3. They acquire descriptive words as well as a beginning vocabulary of music.

4. They improve in listening skills.

5. They develop a sense of appreciation and a sensitivity to many forms of music.

6. They share much musical fun with their friends.

7. They experiment with instruments and sound.

8. They satisfy personal feelings.

   Music is both for the extrovert and introvert. It may subdue the former and arouse the latter. It may provide an emotional release for tenseness, joy, hyperactivity.

   The BIG VOICES and the little voices all find a place in music.

9. Both hyperverbal and timid children literally make friends with music storybook characters. They react, sing along, interject particularly when left to their own musical choices in a quiet, unobserved place.

The art center demands a wide, low table with a practically indestructable top. On this workspace children explore a variety of materials and ideas.

1. They try paints, crayons, clay, paper, paste, collage materials.
2. They pound, tear, scribble, wash, cut, smear.
3. They build basic skills and fine motor control for future writing.
4. They channel emotions into expressions of non-verbal communications.
5. They have experiences that are as varied as their talents and emotions.
6. They demonstrate their desires through haptic art.
7. They interpret the world not as it is or was but as they see and understand it.
8. They begin to appreciate and use line, color, design.

IV. THE ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER

Equipment:

1. Cages
2. Containers
3. Magnets
4. Measuring instruments
5. Batteries
6. Mirrors
7. Magnifying equipment
8. Display tables
9. Collections
10. Hot plate
11. Iron
12. Aquarium, terrarium
13. Garden plot
14. Water table
15. Sand table
16. Soil
17. Feeder stations

This center, often called the science center, usually looks like a what-not collection with its jugs, cans, plants, scales, cages, rocks, seeds, flowers, animals and motley, child-gathered collections. The water table is frequently the focus of attraction although the soil and sand table receive extensive use, too.

This science area is important for several reasons:

1. It satisfies children's natural curiosity and exploratory nature.

2. It helps children understand real life sequences of birth, growth, seasons, cycles.

3. It permits them to predict out-comes and explain such phenomena as, "What happened to the moisture, why are some rocks smooth, how tall will different plants grow in the same period of time?"

4. Science helps children become independent and confident about their surrounding world.

5. It develops in children a sensitivity to things that look different, yet taste the same (i.e., chocolate) and things that look the same but taste different (i.g., pickles).

6. It promotes an inductive form of reasoning since the child is discovering for himself.

7. The environmental center helps children understand their growing role in the world's ecology.

V. THE MATHEMATICS CENTER

Equipment:

1. Abacus
2. Games
3. Cuisenaire rods
4. Counting objects
5. Manipulative materials
6. Magnetic board
7. Rulers, tape measure and scissors
8. Individual flannel boards
9. Large flannel board
10. Overhead projector

Abacus, bottle caps, beads, styrofoam shapes, plastic pieces, rods, popsicle sticks, buttons, beads, macaroni, pictures, fractions in three-dimensional form and infinite other inexpensive items for manipulation and counting are the mainstay of this center. Here children touch, figure, compare, contrast, weigh and conjecture with mathematical materials. Always the teacher is near to assist, clarify or check progress and individual comprehension.

Among the more fascinating objects of this center are:

1. Magnetic boards with magnetic cutouts for learning sets and number.

2. The overhead projector which children like to use, particularly if permitted to make their own transparencies.

3. Various measuring devices to weigh themselves, toys, food; to measure height and distance.

4. Manipulative numerals and objects to solve problems. This is a vital preamble to mental arithmetic.

5. Devices to study likenesses and differences in any mathematical sense.

As children use this center effectively, they integrate tactile experiences with visual representations and verbal concepts.

VI. THE COMMUNICATIONS (Language Arts) CENTER

Equipment:

1. Games
2. Puzzles
3. Flannel board
4. Talkstarters
5. Manipulative objects
6. Puppets
7. Listening posts
8. Perceptual activities
9. Television
10. Telephones
11. Pictures
12. Children's dictionary
13. Typewriter
14. Blackboard
15. Slates

Although the entire classroom is a language center, there is still a need for an area devoted specifically to language development. In this center children have opportunities to learn in ways that are natural to them:

1. They are encouraged to communicate.
2. They have first-hand and free use of language tools (books, typewriters, pictures, crayons, paper, pencils, talkstarters, idea starters, picture dictionaries, etc.).
3. They tell their own stories and see them written down.
4. They hear their own creations read back to them.
5. They transfer ideas into pictures.
6. They learn new words for old.
7. They receive help in specific language development.
8. Their own picturesque speech is accepted for what it is.

VII. THE LIBRARY CORNER

Equipment:

1. Book racks
2. Display board
3. Area rugs
4. Pictures
5. Books, magazines
6. Comfortable seating and lighting

The library center should be a cozy corner with a small lamp, comfortable chairs and many books with or without words (some from the library, some from home and some children can call their very own). This center is a place to relax, a place to share storybook friends, a place to look, listen and talk together softly.

1. Here the children learn the value of reading through many happy experiences with people and books.

2. They find that books and magazines give pleasure and information.

3. Their understanding of language grows.

4. They begin to use the language they hear.

"Tiny Tim, come play with us,
The buttercups are marvelous..."

When story time is presented in this area, there is no need for the teacher to remind anyone to sit quietly and listen for if a child is not interested, he is more than likely in a different center of interest.

Children in other centers often listen quietly while doing their own activities, a better approach to the enjoyment of reading than insisting on rapt attention during a total-group story period. Story hour held in this center also permits the teacher to select stories suitable to the intelligence of the children. Gifted children and/or slow learners do not always like or need the same types of literature.

VIII. The Social Learning Center

Equipment:

1. Globes
2. Maps
3. Puzzles
4. Pictures
5. Current periodicals
6. Newspapers
7. Radio
8. T.V.

It is in this center that children discuss the news of the day, their homes, community, the nation and world events. They enjoy the manipulation of map puzzles and globes. They find newspaper pictures of interest to them. They look at current periodicals.

In a nation that is expected to double its population in the next twenty-five years, it is important for children to learn that:

1. Even though people wear different clothes, live in many kinds of homes, have varied occupations, different hobbies, languages, religious beliefs and politics, they are really very much alike.

2. They all have the same wants and needs:

   - the need for respect and recognition
   - the need for self-worth and dignity
   - the need to love and be loved

3. They must accept strangeness without hostility.

4. They all can do something worthwhile for society.

In this center planning for field trips emphasizing the children's own community rather than other areas is arranged. Through such planned "walking tours" children discover the advantages and disadvantages of their own community. They plan how to alleviate some of the disadvantages and frequently take action for improvement. (For example, one small group of kindergartners persuaded a local mill to eliminate air pollution from a smokestack that had annoyed their town for over thirty years!)

IX. PERCEPTUAL-MOTOR DEVELOPMENT CENTER

Equipment:

1. Large muscle activities
   - a. balance beam
   - b. ropes
   - c. balls
   - d. baskets
   - e. jump balls
   - f. children's trampoline
   - g. old tires

2. Small muscle activities
   - a. blackboard
   - b. creative kits
   - c. clay
   - d. string
   - e. nuts and bolts
   - f. sponge
   - g. templettes & chalk
   - h. collage materials

This center provides practice materials to develop large and small muscles through specifically designed or self-initiated activities. In many cases the center need not be a separate entity but may be incorporated into each of the other centers and the equipment used, for example, for mathematical or language learnings.

Because small muscle development is an important part of physical growth, much attention is paid to the materials that promote dexterity. When our primitive ancestors adopted the upright posture and so released the hands, there was a rapid development of mental powers, and there is still a close relationship between the facility of the hands and mental competency. Equipment for handwork of interest to children promotes good judgment, originality, persistence and coordination.

X. THE AUDIO-VISUAL CENTER

Equipment:

1. Record players
2. Filmstrip projector
3. Filmloop projector
4. Overhead projector
5. Tape recorder
6. Listening posts

This center enhances the child's sense of responsibility through encouraging him to operate audio-visual equipment correctly and carefully.

Here he has the opportunity to organize for a group presentation a story or informational program on a variety of subjects. Such a persentation and discussion is an excellent evaluation of a child's capability.

This center provides an opportunity for any child to enjoy a feeling of accomplishment and to gain in status in the eyes of his peers as he directs and operates a project from beginning to end!

A unique idea for this center and one that children really enjoy is to select a closet as the audio-visual center. A screen or white paper hung on the wall, a small table for the projector and a couple chairs provide an always-ready filmstrip center that most children can operate.

One of the real advantages of open space learning centers is that they eliminate waiting. In this setting, in fact, a child does very little waiting. Since arrival is usually staggered, it provides an excellent opportunity for the teacher to greet each successive pupil on a very personal, one-to-one basis. This moment of welcome, of discovering the child's emotional mood-of-the-day, this brief interaction between teacher and child is invaluable and together with any previous knowledge of the child's abilities, needs and interests forms the basis for the planning of an initial activity.

In this planning the teacher has three options:

1. Let each child select an initial activity without any teacher influence.

2. Use dichotomous questioning by selecting two areas of interest and then permitting the child to choose one or the other.

3. Personally prescribe activities.

It is recognized that in some situations where bussing occurs that students will arrive en masse. This situation can be coped with by giving children an initial play period followed by a planning session. Again the personal relationship is maintained since the teacher permits each child to move, one-by-one, from the planning session to a learning activity mutually agreeable to both.

Since young children have limited abilities to stick to a task, they will need the privilege of moving from one learning center to another providing they have:

1. Completed their original activity.

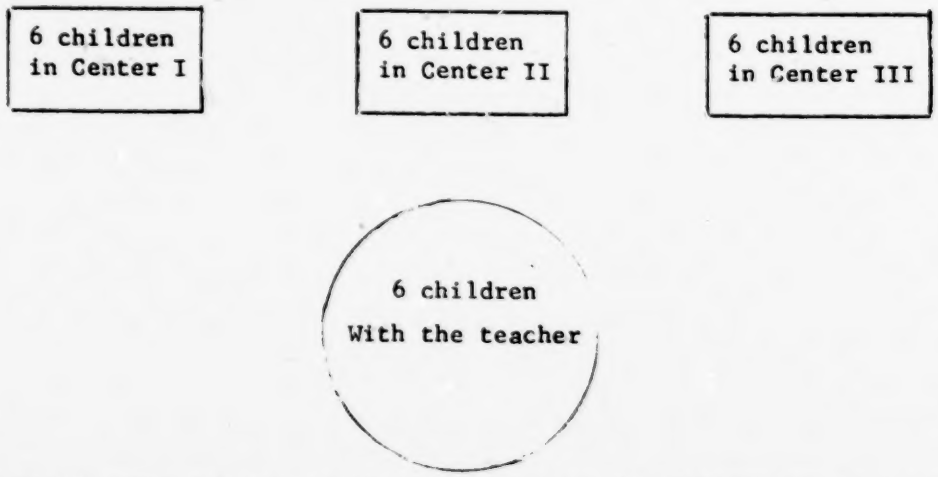
2. Put their equipment in order.

3. Decided on another task to pursue.

At no time is random or aimless movement permitted yet every child has the freedom to look at a book, listen to records or play a non-disruptive game if he chooses.

A simple way to assure that children are where they have agreed to be is to designate each learning center with a different color. The language arts center, to illustrate, can be identified by the color red and each child that begins his work in that center should wear a red yarn circlet around his neck. Another center may be green with the workers there wearing green circlets. If a child is a rover and frequently wonders from area to area, he is easily identified merely because of the color he is wearing. WHEN THEIR TASKS ARE FINISHED AND CHILDREN CHANGE CENTERS, THEY ALSO CHANGE THE YARN CIRCLETS.

In some classrooms the teachers and children have agreed upon a more formal method of movement yet one that children cope with easily. Each day only three learning centers are "open" to the class yet the children are divided into four small groups. They begin their activities in this fashion:

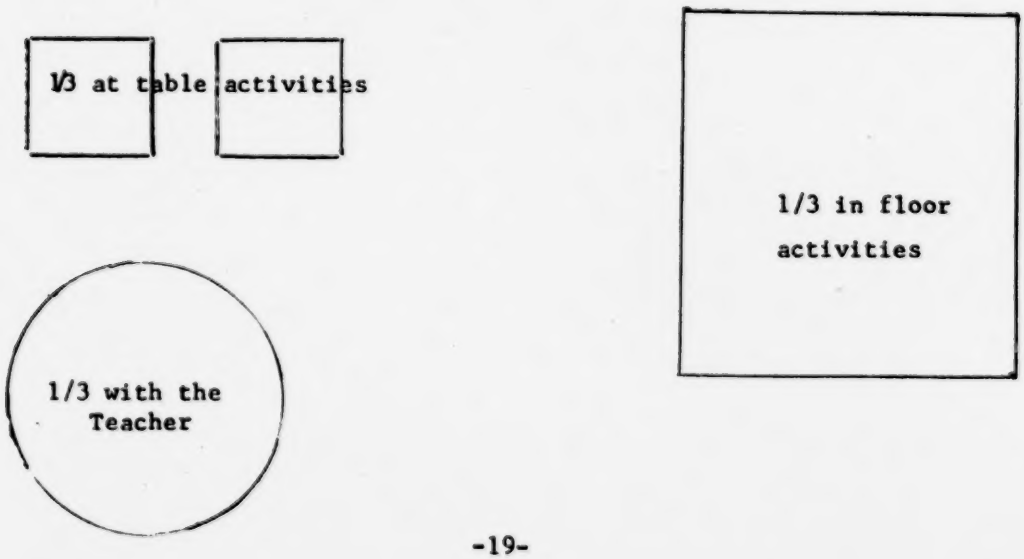


Each small group remains in its activity area for fifteen or twenty minutes and then rotates to the next center. In this fashion, every child participates in each major activity. Again, if anyone completes his task before it is time to rotate, he has a self-selected activity to occupy his interest.

Providing small group periods with the teacher is absolutely essential since only th ough such close association can language skills or deficiencies be discovered and assisted.

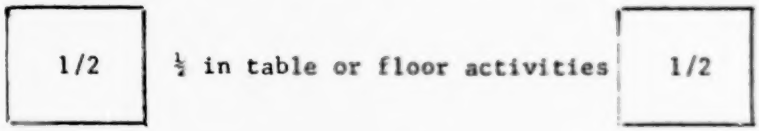
Several other organizational options are:

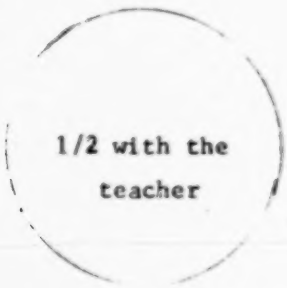
1. Dividing the group into thirds.



Again, the children rotate so that each has opportunity for all the day's major activities.

2. A simpler version is merely dividing the group in half.





For the teacher who feels threatened by the divided-group concept, it might be wise to begin with only one learning center and then add additional centers as both teacher and children become accustomed to the process. An easy format for establishing each center is:

1. Select six children who are dependable and relatively calm.
2. Explain to this group what you wish them to do.
3. Explain to the remaining children why certain students are working alone.
4. Emphasize that others will soon be selected for a second small group activity.
5. Gradually add groups until all but really disruptive children are involved. The latter probably will be happier with individual tasks.

An important aspect to remember is that children do not need divided activities every day. If the teacher desires, this format might be used three times a week with Monday for getting readjusted and for introducing the week's new concepts and Friday for total group "fun" pursuits. As in the old-fashioned one-room schools, Friday is a good day to be <u>different</u> since even the teacher is tired of the same routine by that time of the week. End-of-the-week special activities might include films, filmstrips, sharing time, special science activity, cooking or baking, walking tours, unusual art activity such as use of water colors or pastel wax crayons, singing for another class and story hour with another kindergarten or first grade.

A second item to keep in mind is that the learning center period can be first or last in the day. There is no reason why it must always be the initial activity. Sometimes children and teachers are grateful for nonpressuring, self-selected pursuits during the final hour of the school day.

Whatever the plan for use of learning centers, at the close of an hour the children will begin to manifest signs of needing a change. If the learning center activities have been completed first, then the children will want to move to a group activity. If they have had group action for an hour, they will need the learning centers.

Anytime during the day the teacher may meet with children to provide for specific needs. In the open classroom approach such children are invited to attend small groups. There will be times when they will not wish to come to a special session because of fear of failure or disinterest. They must sometimes be permitted this right for even when they refuse to join the group, they will usually listen to what's happening. They may be physically detached but not mentally!

The real rationale for the open classroom is autonomous behavior, dependency on self, with the ability to make choices and to pursue those choices to completion. This form of inductive learning is a solid foundation for intellectual development. It is not an easy method. There are really no obvious step by step procedures and day-by-day measurable results yet it is a meritorious tool designed to make possible the solution to many current educational problems. As such, it deserves to be tried.